

Summer Rhapsody

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1.

Something about the air in summer invites you
to unfold like a tightly cupped flower bud
warmth teases open your shirt
bumps the flesh
loosens dark cries
drifts them over the lake rocking
to the wap wap of water following
the crick song of the red-winged blackbird
and the elegant ballet of the blue heron
ginger-stepping along the marsh shore

No matter how long you shut your eyes
listen to the waves, imagine ocean
this is still prairie slough, wetland
water that spawned you.

2.

The plane flew over our farm seven or eight times one morning
swooping low, floating on warm air
still unusual enough to cause notice.

Later a man in tan slacks and a straw fedora
offered glossy aerial prints hoping to sell a view.

I pushed between my parents' arms
to peek at patches of field, a twist of creek
the house languishing beside the garden.

When the portrait arrived, someone had coloured it
and now I could see my sister beside the two ton truck
with my father, looking up at the sky
and underneath the lilac bushes in the garden
were the tips of my sandals where I lay
reading *Gone with the Wind*
for the third time
that summer.

3.

When one of the new kittens died
we wrapped her in a rip of flannelette
from our old bedsheet
swathed the stiff body
that fit into a Campbell's tomato soup tin
only the bump of her shrouded head
above the rim.

I handed the can to my sisters
to pose for a funereal photo
Look sad, I told them. Look really sad.
There they are in the picture
Karen holding the tiny coffin
Shawna at her elbow

their lips stuck out in exaggerated sorrow.

We had never been to a funeral
not something you took the kids to then
and could only imagine

but not a month went by
that a baby pig or kitten
a mouse or bird
didn't die on the farm.

The ceremony was the mystery
not the stiffened body
or the absence of breath.

4.

Down the field, the baler shovelled strands of alfalfa and clover
deep into its maw, compacting, tying, spitting out
tight squares of hay as thunder rumbled.
The tractor whined
white flecks
of rain
cut our cheeks
we pitched bales
onto stacks
binder twine
cut through
leather gloves
one strong flash
of lightning
drove us
inside to watch the summer crop soaking
madness settling into later afternoon wonder time.

5.

Getting up late on a summer morning, the sun already six hours old,
You munch toast and jam and cheddar cheese
 the same breakfast you've eaten since last winter,
You check the garden out the window, long straight rows of green and
 the perimeter of blooming flowers African daisies, portulaca, tiger
 lilies
Your mother's back up and down, the short-handled hoe slicing before
 she reaches to pull out the stubborn stinkweed.
Somehow she senses your late rising, has some kind of radar where
 you're concerned
And comes into the house demanding that it's your turn, there is no time
 for idleness in the summer on a working farm
She wants you to weed the carrots, an endless row of sorting without the
 hoe, only your fingers
The sun is hot, your back hurts, the dirt grinds into your knees, there has
 to be a better way to get a suntan
When she calls you in for dinner the house is cool, the heat from your
 sunwarmed skin dissolving in shade
She's made new potatoes steamed and served with butter and dill, fresh
 peas, cold beef, a large meal when you still need the energy to work
As your parents, sisters and you sit around the warm food in the cool
 house, a settling calm stops the hottest part of the day
You realize how quickly summer is leaving and resolve that tomorrow
 you'll rise at seven even if the sun is hot and even if you have weed
 the garden.